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Radical humanism: Review of Frames of War

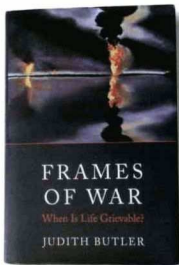
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Radical Humanism

Judith Butler's
Frames of War



Reviewed by
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Judith Butler's latest book was written in response to the official and unofficial military interventions carried out in the name of fighting terrorism in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Butler turns her painstaking and engaged attention towards the aesthetic management of the global politics of torture, delving into the framing and re-framing mechanisms that mediate the perception of bodies that have been construed as "the enemy" from the Euro-American perspective. Butler manages this task while simultaneously returning to the analysis of gender and sexuality that characterized her earlier work. In a public landscape

influenced by eight years of the rhetoric put forward by the government of George W. Bush, the nuance and specificity of critical analysis suffered in favour of fear-mongering and arbitrary aggression. Within this increasingly conservative political and rhetorical context, *Frames of War* (2010) emerges as an urgent, if not always easy, critical response that aims to radically re-think states of humanity in anti-racist, queer terms.

The book deals with the question of when and how a body is recognized as having a life. In other words, which sets of social and political circumstances grant and maintain the possibility of becoming a subject. In the first chapter, Butler responds to a series of poems written by Guantanamo Bay prisoners, engaging in a fundamental reconsideration of humanism by theorizing it using a deconstructive logic. She suggests that it is not autonomous individuality that humanizes, but rather the connections that exist between individuals that grant a breathing body a life. In this line of reasoning, violence towards the other imperils the survival of the self. Butler foregrounds the body's fragility and proposes interdependence between bodies as the grounds for an ethics that allows for the survival of human life. This state of humanity is marked by what she terms "grievability," the capacity to conceive of a life as worthy of mourning when it is lost. A grievable life, Butler posits, is a life that is institutionally recognized and protected through community so that it may survive. Yet grievability is not granted evenly. In her introduction, Butler understands the racist and

patriarchal underpinnings of the US-led military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan in terms of a "differential distribution" [1] that construes some bodies as *more human* than others.

In the Canadian context, a palpating example of a body who has not been seen as worthy of the right to otherwise standard juridical protections can be found in Omar Khadr, the Canadian man of Egyptian heritage who was arrested in Afghanistan as a minor in 2002, held without charges for three years, and then convicted of war crimes in Guantanamo's extra-judicial military tribunals in 2010. [2] Khadr's situation stands in stark contrast to a case involving an as-yet unnamed American citizen who claims he was detained in Iraq by the US military for nine months without explanation; a recent judgment by a federal judge has granted this person, a former military contractor, the right to sue former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld personally for authorizing "torturous interrogation techniques." [3]

Butler's argument allows for the emergence of basic but urgent questions concerning the conditions that have structured, maintained and legitimized Khadr's irregular imprisonment: What has made it possible for Khadr to be rendered as something other than a citizen and a human being deserving of basic legal protections in the eyes of American and Canadian public institutions? Why was there a three-year gap between the time of his arrest and his indictment on charges of murder for the death of a U.S. soldier? Why did the Supreme Court

of Canada overturn the decision of a lower Court of Appeals that ordered Stephen Harper's government to repatriate Khadr, even when the Supreme Court unanimously agreed that not doing so constituted a violation of his rights as a Canadian citizen? When will Khadr and other Guantanamo prisoners who have reported physical and mental torture have a chance to file a claim against senior members of the Bush administration for implementing torture as an interrogation technique? What would it take for Khadr's humanity to be recognized in the midst of such a brutalizing context?

Butler's focus on poetry and photography throughout the book highlights the role that sensory perception plays in making and justifying decisions affecting the lives of others. Her engagement with processes of framing suggests that the uneven distribution of human recognition has significant aesthetic dimensions. In the book's centerpiece essay on the production and circulation of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, she writes alongside and against Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2002). She reflects on how the cruelty motivating the production of the photographs was critically re-framed through public showings of the images, such as the exhibition at the International Center for Photography in New York, [4] prompting public opinion around the globe to reconsider their unconditional support for the Iraq War. A critical contextualization of these images of pain denies the triumphant tone of their making and exposes the brutality of their intention.

Francisco-Fernando Granados is a Guatemalan-born artist and writer working in performance, video, drawing, cultural criticism and curatorial practice. His work has been exhibited in galleries and artist-run spaces including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art, the ArtLAB at the University of Western Ontario, and the Images Festival. His writing has been published through VIVO Media Arts Centre, and FUSE, where he contributes as part of the magazine's Editorial Committee. He is currently working on a Masters of Visual Studies at the University of Toronto.

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London; New York: Verso, 2009).

[1] Butler 2009, 24.

[2] "Omar Khadr's road to trial," *CBC News*, August 12, 2010.

[3] "US judge allows army veteran to sue Rumsfeld," *Al Jazeera*, August 4, 2011.

[4] Butler 2009, 95.

A change in perception, an *aesthetic shift*, emerges with the possibility of seeing the images outside and against the intentions of the eyes which first framed them. This shift constitutes what Butler references as the "framing of the frame," or the "framing of the framer" [5] — phrases she borrows from artist, filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-ha. [6] According to Butler, the act of revealing the underpinnings of a given frame performs an ethics of photography by producing a context that continuously breaks with itself as a means to remain critical. Such a contextual ethics of framing resists the production of the kind of nationalist mythmaking that has comfortably allowed for the dissolution of juridical guarantees for Khadr and other individuals in his position.

The chapter titled "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time" explores the political deployment of European ideas of progress and modernity in the service of xenophobia. This section responds to border restrictions aimed at keeping out primarily Muslim migrants, and laws such as the recent banning of the burqa and the niqab in France [7] and Belgium. [8] Relevant still in the wake of the large number of refugees created by the conflict in Libya and other nations in the region, Butler develops a nuanced critique of racist assumptions that imagine Muslims as fundamentalist homophobes who must be kept out of "modern" European society. Such conservative arguments use gay rights as an alibi to justify discrimination against populations of non-European descent. People who practice Islam, in particular, are framed as

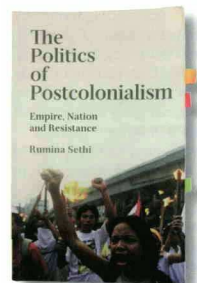
a threat to supposedly socially progressive, secular values that imagine queer populations as exclusively white. Sections like this may return the reader to more familiar Butler territory. She is most well known for her work from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which contributed to shifting the focus of critical feminist practice by emphasizing the category of gender over more simplified divisions between "man" and "woman." [9] Butler uses her gender analysis to criticize the exploitation of juridical LGBTQ guarantees for socially conservative purposes. She does this by tracing the patriarchal inflexion of ideas around mainstream European secularism that find their roots in Christian fundamentalism.

While keeping an eye on the political workings of gender, Butler's work has shifted its focus in recent years. She has continued to challenge conservative assumptions applied unevenly to Muslims by suggesting "we ought not understand secularism as the sole source of critique, or religion as the sole source of dogmatism." [10] The aim of her intellectual project since *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) has become the crafting of a critique of state violence drawn from the study of the work of twentieth century Jewish scholars. Her lectures and essays over the last years have turned to thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas and Primo Levi. The development of this work, combined with her activism in support for campaigns that advocate an end to the violence against Palestinian populations in

Gaza, the West Bank and abroad has allowed Butler to use her training in Jewish philosophy to confront and dispute the notion that any criticism of the State of Israel with regards to the occupation of Palestinian territories constitutes an act of anti-Semitism.

As part of this larger project, I understand *Frames of War* as describing an ethics beyond self-congratulation and self-righteousness that may itself become an approach for what she images as an emergent Left politics. Her notion of re-framing highlights a set of intellectual and social possibilities that connect the aesthetic implications of perception with the critical task of consistent political action. *Frames of War* reads as a work grappling with the ethics of seeing images and structuring ways of looking, an ethics that calls for critique to be turned on oneself first and foremost:

The struggle against violence accepts that violence is one's own possibility... if one pictured as a beautiful soul, as someone by definition without violent aggression, there could be no ethical quandary, no struggle and no problem. [11]



Rumina Sethi's *The Politics of Postcolonialism: Empire, Nation and Resistance*

Reviewed by
Leila Timmins

Locating postcolonial studies within the twenty-first century requires situating it within the contemporary globalized world, a moment defined by the unrestricted flow of capital, the spread of transnational corporations and the erosion of traditional distinctions between nations and nationhood, which necessitates a shift in the way we engage with the so-called "post." It is, perhaps, this unassuming prefix, "post-," that has led to so much contention in the study of postcolonialism. On the one hand, in this age of "post-" politics, postcolonialism has come to mean an infinite number of things — a historical transition, an achieved epoch, a cultural location, a theoretical stance — but,

[5] Ibid., 8.

[6] Trinh T. Minh Ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[7] "France begins ban on niqab and burqa," *The Guardian*, April 12, 2011.

[8] Ian Traynor, "Belgium moves towards public ban on burka and niqab," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2010.

[9] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988).

[10] Butler 2009, 122.

[11] Ibid., 171-2.